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ABSTRACT

This report examines Americans' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions about public education over the past three decades. The major conclusions are as follows: (1) Americans continue to value and have confidence in public schools. The more first-hand knowledge people have about the public schools, the more favorable their perceptions; (2) People are split on the question of whether the nation's schools are as good as they used to be; many people, particularly employers and college-level educators, think public schools are not as good as they can and should be; (3) There is widespread concern about the quality and performance of the nation's urban schools; (4) Public perceptions about what is wrong with education are complex and, in some cases, at odds with the facts; (5) Many Americans view public-school funding as neither adequate nor equitable, but few agree about the best way to finance schools; (6) Across a wide spectrum of interests and perspectives, there is a surprising level of agreement about the purpose of public education and about what it will take to improve schools; (7) Americans favor reforming the public-school system rather than dismantling and replacing it; and (8) Americans still trust teachers, principals, and school-board members to manage schools, but the public's trust is wavering. (Contains 18 references.) (RJM)

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AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION

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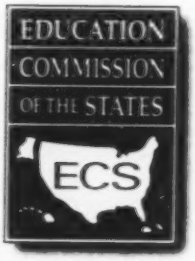

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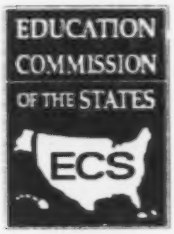

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The paper was prepared as background information for the National Commission on Governing America's Schools, with financial support from the Joyce Foundation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reviews and synthesizes the findings of major nationwide polls and surveys exploring Americans' attitudes, opinions and perceptions about public education over the past three decades. In preparing this analysis, we relied primarily on the findings of two organizations whose expertise and reliability in this area are preeminent:

- Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), which, in conjunction with the Gallup Organization, has conducted an annual, nationwide public opinion survey on education issues since 1968

- Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that has conducted a series of in-depth national surveys over the past several years focused on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers, parents, students, minority groups, community leaders and the public at large.

The major findings of the paper are as following:

- Far from having given up on the nation's public schools, Americans continue to value and have confidence in them. And the more firsthand knowledge people have about the public schools, the more favorable their perceptions.

- Public opinion is split on the question of whether the nation's schools are as good as they used to be. Still, many people -- particularly employers and college-level educators — think the public schools are not as good as they can and should be.

- There is widespread concern, in particular, about the quality and performance of the nation's urban schools.

- Public perceptions about what is wrong with the education system are varied, complex and, in some cases, at odds with the facts.

- Many Americans view public school funding as neither adequate nor equitable, but there is little agreement about the best way to finance schools.

- Across a wide spectrum of interests and perspectives, there is a surprising level of agreement about the purpose of public education — and about what it will take to improve schools.

- Americans favor reforming the public school system rather than dismantling and replacing it.

- Americans still trust teachers, principals and school board members to make decisions about how to manage the schools, but the public's trust is wavering.

INTRODUCTION

In today's political environment, the results of public opinion polls appear to be increasingly influencing political decisions. These polls attempt to understand the opinion of a given population by asking questions of a portion of that population. Some proponents maintain that polls provide another opportunity for citizens' voices to be heard by politicians. Critics contend polling necessarily reduces complex issues to simple formulations and does little to illuminate underlying factors or suggest alternative approaches.

Regardless of whether the apparently increasing influence of polling results is a good or bad development, it appears that politicians and policymakers will continue to use such information. At the minimum, they should be informed users of polling results and able to assess polls' value and validity. Following are several key questions to consider in evaluating polling results:

- Who conducted the poll?
- Who was polled?
- How and when were they polled?
- How many people were polled?
- How were the polling questions worded?

The purpose of this report is to review and synthesize the findings of major nationwide polls and surveys exploring Americans' attitudes, opinions and perceptions about public education over the past three decades. In preparing this analysis, we relied primarily on the findings of two organizations whose expertise and reliability in this area are preeminent:

- Phi Delta Kappa (PDK), which in conjunction with the Gallup Organization has conducted an annual, nationwide public opinion survey on education issues since 1968
- Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that has conducted a series of in-depth national surveys over the past several years focused on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers, parents, students, minority groups, community leaders and the public at large.

It is hoped that this report will contribute to a more coherent understanding of education polling information, and thus give politicians and policymakers a better picture of how the public feels about a variety of education issues.

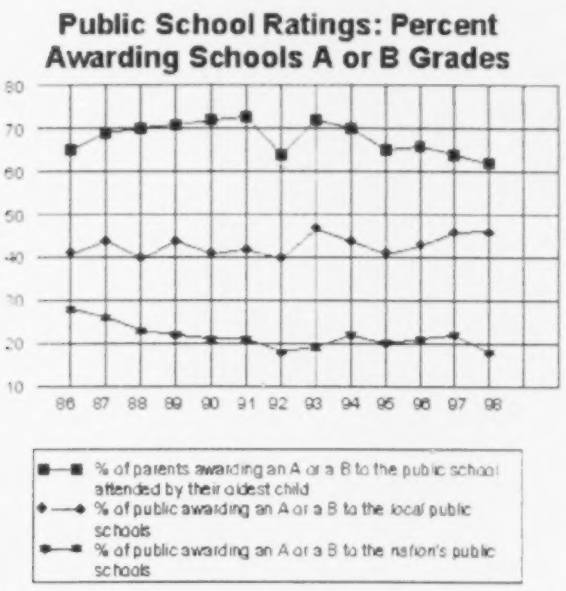
AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC EDUCATION

- ***Far from having given up on the nation's public schools, Americans continue to value and have confidence in them. And the more first-hand knowledge people have about the public schools, the more favorable their perceptions.***

Since 1974, respondents to the annual PDK/Gallup poll have been asked to grade the public schools in their communities on a scale of A to F. In 1981, a second question was added in which the public was asked to grade the "nation's public schools." Then, beginning in 1985, parents participating in the poll were asked to grade the public school their oldest child was attending.

The trends established by this series of questions have been consistent (see Figure 1). They make it clear that the closer people are to the public schools, the higher their regard for them. The schools they rate the lowest — "the nation's public schools" — are those "about which information comes primarily through media reports and other secondary sources," according to PDK/Gallup poll officials.

Figure 1


Public School Ratings: Percent Awarding Schools A or B Grades
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98
% of parents awarding an A or a B to the public school attended by their oldest child
% of public awarding an A or a B to the local public schools
% of public awarding an A or a B to the nation's public schools

Ask people about the schools they do know, and the grades they assign go up. Indeed, the percentage of respondents who award the schools a grade of A or B increases almost 30 percentage points when people are asked about the schools in their own community rather than about "the nation's schools." It rises again when public school parents, those closest to the schools, are asked to rate the schools. And, finally, it increases again when public school parents are asked to grade the school their oldest child attends.

It is also worth noting that next to the church, the public school system is the institution in which Americans have the most confidence. In the most recent PDK/Gallup poll, released in August 1998, 42% of respondents said they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the schools — ahead of local and state government, big business, Congress, the justice system, organized labor and the media. Only "the church or organized religion" (57%) rated higher.

In *How America Views Its Schools*, an in-depth review of the annual PDK/Gallup polls between 1969 and 1994, the Gallup Organization's Stanley Elam disputed the notion that Americans steadily have lost faith in the public school system.

"That U.S. public schools are failing has become a media cliche," Elam wrote. "Many school critics and media pundits have assumed that the public has bought this cliche and is ready to abandon the defining features of democratic public education."

But far from having given up on public schools, Elam said, Americans are relatively well-satisfied with the job public schools are doing. This satisfaction is particularly strong among that segment of the public in the best position to hold informed opinions: parents of public schoolchildren.

Elam noted confidence in public education is lowest among groups who are most poorly served: inner-city blacks, other minorities and people living in poverty, including the rural poor.

"Only rarely do wealthier or better-educated public school parents give their children's schools D's or F's," Elam said. "One reason is that better-educated and affluent parents can move to districts with better schools; by and large, the poor cannot. Moreover, advantaged parents fight to maintain and improve their community schools and have the means to do so."

It should be noted that teachers are more positive than the public at large about the quality and performance of local public schools. Among the findings of a nationwide survey of teachers conducted in 1996 by Public Agenda, for example, are the following:

- More than three-fourths of teachers think their local schools outperform the private ones, compared to just 33% of the public and 29% of community leaders.

- While a majority of the public (60%) believes schools are not placing enough emphasis on the basics of reading, writing and mathematics, most teachers (66%) believe they do.

- ***Public opinion is split on the question of whether the nation's schools are as good as they used to be. Still, many people — particularly employers and college-level educators — think the public schools are not as good as they can and ought to be.***

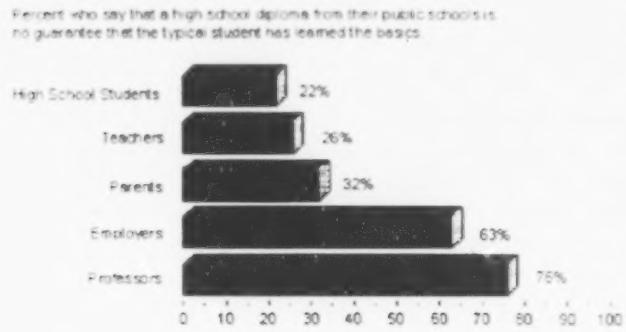
Americans' assessment of whether children are getting a better or worse education today than they themselves received has changed little since the question first was asked in the PDK/Gallup poll nearly two decades ago. According to the 1998 poll, 41% of Americans believe children get a better education, 48% say children get a worse education, 8% believe there is no difference, and 3% say "don't know." By comparison, the ratings in the 1979 poll were 41% (better), 42% (worse), 9% (no difference) and 8% (don't know).

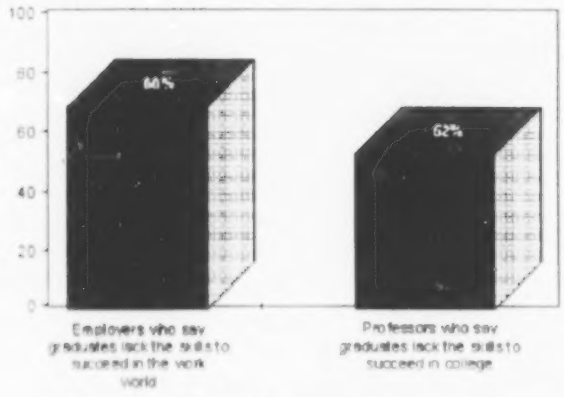
Whether or not schools are as good as they used to be, many Americans think the schools can and ought to be better than they are. For example, according to the 1997 PDK/Gallup poll, 54% of Americans believe the public school curriculum should be "upgraded to meet today's needs." This figure is up sharply since 1982, when only one in three Americans expressed support for curriculum upgrading. And roughly nine in 10 Americans believe public school students are capable of learning more math and science than they do today.

According to a January 1998 poll by Public Agenda, concern over the shortcomings of public education is particularly strong among the ultimate "consumers" of the public schools — employers who make hiring decisions and professors who teach college undergraduates. Their judgments about the academic skills of the young people they see are almost the exact opposite of judgments made by teachers, parents and the students themselves (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Does a Diploma Guarantee the Basics?





SOURCE: Public Agenda, 1998

For example, while high school teachers (66%) are confident that most or all of their students have the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace, roughly the same percentage of employers (68%) disagree and say the graduates they see are not ready to succeed. And even as the vast majority of students (71%) say they definitely plan to go to college, the professors who will teach them harbor serious doubts about their academic skills. More than half the college professors surveyed (52%) say students they see lack the skills necessary to succeed in college.

Similarly, employers and college educators are at odds with the other groups when it comes to judging the performance of local schools, according to Public Agenda. About seven in 10 employers (69%) and college professors (68%) say that based on their experience, local public schools do only a fair or poor job. In sharp contrast, teachers, students and parents give local schools good or excellent ratings (93%, 77% and 72%, respectively).

- ***There is widespread concern about the quality and performance of the nation's urban schools in particular.***

Public concern over the quality and performance of inner-city schools has risen steadily over the past decade. According to the 1998 PDK/Gallup poll, 86% of Americans consider it "very important" to improve the nation's inner-city schools — up from 81% in 1993 and 74% in 1989. The public also sees urban schools as operating under greater pressures and burdens than their nonurban counterparts. In the 1997 PDK/Gallup poll, 69% of respondents said they believe the problems facing urban schools are "much more serious" or "somewhat more serious" than those facing other schools.

Just as significant, the public expresses strong support for spending more money to improve urban schools. Asked whether they would be willing to pay more taxes to fund such improvements, 66% of respondents in the 1998 PDK/Gallup poll answered "yes." This response, poll officials said, was especially high among nonwhites (79%), Democrats (74%) and people between the ages of 50 and 64 (78%).

There is considerable skepticism, however, about policies that provide for a state takeover of chronically low-performing schools and/or districts. Over the past decade, about half of the states have adopted laws that allow the takeover of schools — or, in some cases, entire districts — that have been judged "academically bankrupt." In the 1997 PDK/Gallup poll, only 25% of respondents thought such an approach would lead to improved student achievement, while 69% said they thought it would have either no effect or a negative effect on student achievement.

It is also worth noting that while the perceptions of both urban and nonurban parents of public school students are generally quite similar and positive, teachers in urban areas voice misgivings about their schools and students that are closer to those of employers and college professors.

According to Public Agenda's January 1998 poll, only one in five urban high school teachers (19%) believe all or most of their students have the skills needed to do well in college, compared with nearly half (47%) of nonurban teachers. Urban high school teachers also are less likely than their nonurban counterparts to say their students have the skills needed to succeed in the workplace (57% vs. 71%).

- ***Public perceptions about what is wrong with the education system are varied, complex and, in some cases, at odds with the facts.***

While most of the questions asked in the annual PDK/Gallup poll vary from year to year, one question has been included in all of the surveys since 1969: "What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools must deal?"

Over the years, this open-ended question has yielded a wide variety of responses that poll officials have grouped into roughly 50 different categories. Three of these categories — "discipline," "drugs" and "finance" — have dominated the list for the past three decades, although in the most recent poll, "drugs" slipped to fourth place and "fighting/violence/gangs" rose to the top of the list.

In his review of the 1969-1994 PDK/Gallup polls, Elam noted that poll respondents, on their own, "seldom make a distinction between problems inherent in the larger society" — such as drugs or violence — and those "that are susceptible of solution or amelioration through programs that schools can initiate." Yet when asked to make this distinction, he said, "they prove capable of doing so."

To illustrate his point, Elam noted the responses to a question in the 1990 poll asking where the blame for the problems confronting public education should be placed — on the schools themselves or on society in general. An overwhelming 73% of respondents assigned blame to "the effect of societal problems."

Similarly, the public's view of the significance of external factors on school quality is evident in the responses to a question asked in the 1997 PDK/Gallup poll: "Why are some schools better than others?" Overwhelmingly, the public considers the amount of support from parents of students in the public schools to be the most important factor in making a school better. Eighty-six percent of respondents rated parental support and involvement as very important — compared with 62% who considered "the amount of money spent on local schools" as very important and 41% who rated "the kinds of students attending local schools" as very important.

How well-informed is the American public about the education system? To what extent do public perceptions line up with the facts?

The 1996 PDK/Gallup poll revealed what poll officials called "widespread public misinformation" on dropout rates, on how the academic achievement of U.S. students compares with that of students in other developed countries and on the scope and cost of special education.

As an example, the dropout rate in the United States has been on the decline for many years for both majority and minority students and is considerably lower today (roughly 12% overall) than it was 25 years ago. Yet 64% of those polled in 1996 said they believed the dropout rate was higher than it was in the mid-1970s, while only 15% said they believed it was lower.

On the issue of special education, the public is unaware of the percentage of public school students who receive special education in its various forms and of the magnitude of the financial burden special education places on the system. Only one in four respondents came reasonably close to estimating the percentage of special-needs students in the school population, and only 7% were aware that it costs at least 100% more to educate a special-needs student than it does the average public-school student.

What's more, Public Agenda's January 1998 survey revealed a troubling lack of information and knowledge about school and student performance among those closest to the schools — parents. Among Public Agenda's findings were the following:

- Only 7% of parents say they know a lot about how well their children's academic achievement compares with that of students abroad. More revealing is that only 15% know a lot about where their children stand in comparison with other youngsters in the United States, and only 23% can say where their children stand compared with others in their own state.

- This information shortage extends to schools and teachers. Only about one-third of parents (35%) know a lot about how their schools rank in comparison with others in their own district, and only 24% know a lot about the qualifications of their own children's teachers.

- ***Many Americans view public school funding as neither adequate nor equitable, but there is little agreement about the best way to finance schools.***

In his analysis of school funding-related questions in the PDK/Gallup polls from 1969 through 1994, Elam concluded school finance "is an area of considerable confusion for most lay people."

but noted the majority of Americans were in general agreement on at least two points: (1) that differences in funding from state to state and from district to district are largely responsible for the uneven quality of public education in America, and (2) that "more must be done" — including raising taxes — to improve the quality of schools in poorer states and communities.

Among other things, Elam cited a sharp decline over the years in the percentage of people who considered there to be little or no connection between school expenditures and school effectiveness — 48% of respondents in 1973 vs. 30% in 1993.

Elam also noted a steady increase during the same period in the percentage of people willing to pay higher taxes to improve schools. More specifically, he pointed to a finding in the 1993 poll that two in three respondents (68%) were willing to pay higher taxes to improve schools in poorer states and communities. (The level of public support on this issue has held steady in the five years since Elam's analysis. The 1998 PDK/Gallup poll showed 66% of respondents willing to pay higher taxes for this purpose.)

As for how public schools should be financed, Elam noted that poll respondents over the years have consistently opposed what is still a general practice: reliance on local property taxes for the lion's share of public school funding. But Americans remain undecided about exactly how the public school system should be financed.

In the 1998 PDK Gallup poll, just 21% of respondents said local property taxes should be the major funding source for schools, while 33% chose state taxes, 37% chose federal taxes and 9% said "don't know." A significant change since 1986 is that the percentage of those saying they favor using federal taxes to finance schools has gone up by 13 percentage points.

- ***Across a wide spectrum of interests and perspectives, there is a surprising level of agreement about the purpose of public education — and about what it will take to improve schools.***

Over the years, the annual PDK/Gallup poll has asked various questions aimed at exploring public perceptions and beliefs about the goals of education and the role of public schools in reaching them.

The most recent of these questions, posed in the 1996 poll, asked people to rate the importance of six goals for the public schools. By an overwhelming majority (86% of respondents), the goal of "preparing students to be responsible citizens" was rated most important, followed by "helping people become economically self-sufficient." Poll officials pointed out that this response was consistent across all sub-groups — the public at large, parents, teachers, minorities, whites and upper- and lower-income people.

Other recent surveys reveal a remarkable degree of consensus about what it will take to improve student achievement and school quality.

For example, in *Time to Move On*, a report on its 1998 nationwide survey of white and black parents, Public Agenda concluded: "Despite many differences in their experiences and concerns,

white and black parents have strikingly similar visions of what it takes to educate kids well: involved parents, top-notch staff and schools that guarantee the basics, teach students good work habits, set high academic expectations and standards for students, and ensure safety and order."

The Public Agenda report noted that white and black parents, in responding to questions asking them to identify the absolutely essential characteristics of good schools, came within five percentage points of one another on 9 of 12 questions. "Comments by white and black parents on what a good school means were so remarkably alike as to be virtually indistinguishable," the report said (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

What's Important for Schools

How important is it for a school to [INSERT RANDOMLY]? Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important?

% saying "absolutely essential" (Split sample)	Black Parents	White Parents
Be free from weapons, drugs and gangs	93%	97%
Make sure students master the basics such as reading, writing and arithmetic*	91	95
Have teachers who pay personal attention to kids and want them all to succeed^	88	89
Have teachers and a principal who push students to study hard and to excel academically^	87	82
Make sure all kids can speak and write standard English, with proper pronunciation and grammar^	86	90
Teach such values as honesty, respect and civility^	84	83
Promote kids to the next grade only after they show they have learned what they were supposed to*	83	82
Make sure students behave themselves in class and on the school grounds*	82	87
Teach good work habits such as being neat, responsible, and on time^	78	80
Teach the contributions blacks and other minorities have made to American history^	75	59
Have a diverse student body with kids from different ethnic and racial backgrounds*	60	34
Expect all kids to go on to college*	51	31

* Split sample. Black Parents, n = 401; White Parents, n = 402.
^ Split sample. Black Parents, n = 399; White Parents, n = 398.

Note on Question Wording: Wording has been slightly edited for space. Full question wording is available from Public Agenda in the Technical Appendix for this study.

Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Source: Public Agenda (1998). *Time to Move On: African-American and White Parents Set an Agenda for Public Schools.*

Another recent Public Agenda report, *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today*, revealed striking similarities in the perceptions of teachers, parents and the public at large with regard to school improvement.

While teachers and the public at large hold some contrary views, especially in their assessment of how well public schools are doing, they "seem to share a remarkably lengthy and detailed agenda for action," the report said. "Both agree on the essential elements of the curriculum. Both are convinced that higher standards will benefit children from all backgrounds. Both believe that restoring order and discipline in schools is an urgent priority and favor similar steps to do so. Both question the usefulness of some newer teaching techniques, and both see fostering such qualities as persistence, inner drive and respect for others as an integral aspect of education."

Among the major findings from the Public Agenda survey are the following:

- Both teachers and the public cite lack of order as a top problem in schools, and both support the use of aggressive measures to address it, including restricting students to school grounds during lunch, enforcing smoking bans, removing persistent troublemakers from class and expelling students caught bringing weapons or drugs to school. But both teachers and the public are ambivalent about the need for dress codes, and both overwhelmingly reject reintroducing corporal punishment.

- Teachers, like much of the public, favor traditional approaches to education and are wary of certain trends and innovations. Both groups, for example, reject the use of calculators in math instruction in the early grades, and both are largely unenthusiastic about heterogeneous grouping — mixing slow and fast learners in the same classroom.

- Teachers also are closely aligned with the public in rejecting the idea of social promotion. Eight in 10 teachers want students to be promoted "only when the students have shown they have learned the knowledge and skills expected of them." Eighty-three percent support withholding high school diplomas until students "clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well."

On the issue of academic standards for students, another recent Public Agenda poll showed they are widely seen as a positive force in improving academic achievement. Overwhelming majorities of parents (82%), teachers (77%), employers (92%) and college professors (89%) believe setting standards for students helps improve academic performance.

The Public Agenda survey noted teachers support higher standards, but their support is "less intense" than the public's. Teachers tend to focus on what they consider the foremost problems of their schools — lack of funding, overcrowded classes, lack of parental involvement. "Reformers pushing hard for higher standards may want to consider carefully teachers' calls for a more orderly, civilized and disciplined school environment," the report noted. "From the teachers' perspective, order and civility form the infrastructure that good teaching builds on."

- ***Americans favor reforming the public school system rather than dismantling and replacing it.***

Vouchers

While there is growing interest in and support for the idea of using market forces to improve the performance of public schools, Americans remain closely divided on the issue of whether to open the education system to all-out competition between public and private schools.

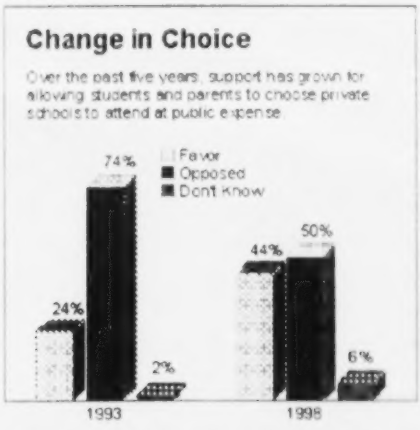
The 1998 PDK/Gallup Poll showed a 50-50 split among survey respondents on the question of allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense. But the poll also showed that the gap between Americans who oppose vouchers or tax credits and those who favor them has narrowed considerably since 1993, when opponents outnumbered supporters by roughly 3 to 1 (see Figure 4).

Public support of funding for private or church-related schools is contingent, however, on several factors. Among the findings of the 1998 PDK/Gallup poll were these:

- Seventy-five percent of respondents said schools accepting government tuition payments should be accountable to the state "in the same way the public schools are accountable."

- Seventy percent of respondents said nonpublic schools accepting public funds should be required to accept students from a wider range of backgrounds and academic ability than is now generally the case.

Figure 4



SOURCE: Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools

It also should be noted that there continues to be strong opposition to using public funds to pay all (as opposed to part) of the costs for sending children to nonpublic schools. Only 30% of respondents said they opposed allowing parents who send their children to nonpublic schools to recover part of the tuition costs from public funds, but 42% opposed recovery of all tuition paid.

Public school parents who participated in the 1998 PDK/Gallup poll were asked what they would do if given the option of sending their oldest child to any public, private or church-related school, with tuition paid by the government. Fifty-one percent of parents said they would choose their present public school; another 6% would choose a different public school. This brings to 57% the number of families that would choose to remain in the public school system. Thirty-nine percent would choose a private or church-related school.

It should be noted that the PDK/Gallup poll's findings on the voucher issue have come under f recently from several organizations, including the Center for Education Reform, which favor using market forces to improve public school performance. These groups contend the poll seriously understates the magnitude of public support for free-market reforms.
In a recent press release, the Center for Education Reform argued the PDK/Gallup poll is flawed, first, by use of the word "voucher," which "carries negative connotations with the public," and, second, by leaving the impression that anyone, regardless of income, would qualify for funds under a school choice system (which is not, the center notes, "how the issue is being advanced at any level of government").

The center's own nationwide survey, conducted in 1997, broke the issue down into: (1) overall public sentiment on choice as a concept, (2) overall public support for school choice legislation and (3) the public's view on the use of taxpayer dollars to fund school choice options. Among the findings were the following:

- Eighty-two percent of respondents strongly or somewhat support "providing parents with the option of sending their children to the school of their choice — either public, private or parochial — rather than only to the school to which they are assigned."

- Sixty-seven percent of respondents support state legislatures' adoption of policies "to assist children in failing schools to opt out of that school and attend an alternative school of the parents' choosing."

- Seventy-two percent of respondents strongly or somewhat support "allowing poor parents to be given the tax dollars allotted for their child's education and permitting them to use those dollars in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing."

Home Schooling

When the PDK/Gallup poll first asked a question about home schooling in 1985, 73% of respondents said they thought it was "a bad thing," 16% said it was "a good thing," and 11% had no opinion. In 1997, when the question was asked again, poll findings showed the public still feels the home-school movement is a bad idea, but the margin has shrunk to just 21 percentage points (57% bad, 36% good).

Nonpublic school parents, who thought the home-school movement was a bad thing in 1985 (by a margin of 71% to 22%), now favor it 52% to 41%. This is the only group sampled that believes the home-school movement is a good idea.

Privatization

Most Americans approve of the idea of privatizing some school services, such as transportation and maintenance, but strongly reject privatization of schools' basic instructional function. According to the 1997 PDK/Gallup poll:

- Fifty-nine percent of respondents oppose (vs. 34% favor) privatizing the entire public school operation, including instruction. (This is a major swing just since 1994, when respondents were about evenly divided on this idea, 45% in favor, 47% against).
- There is strong support for contracting out food service (81%), maintenance (70%) and transportation (75%).

School Reform

In his 1993 review of the PDK/Gallup polls, Elam noted a strong, stable trend of public support for education innovation and change "as long as the change promises improvement."

Elam rank-ordered a list of more than 100 different proposed reforms on which poll participants had been queried over the years, covering a wide range of school concerns: curriculum (both expansion and contraction), achievement standards, finance, instructional strategies, parental responsibility, facility use, equalization of opportunity, expansion of school aims and functions, and job training and placement. Elam's analysis concluded the public, over the years, has supported roughly 60% of the proposed changes they were questioned about.

But while the public increasingly is receptive to innovation and to building greater flexibility into the school system, Elam concluded, most people remain skeptical about more radical alternatives — full-scale voucher systems, privatization of schools' instructional function, home schooling and the like.

"In summary, it can be said that the American public is almost universally supportive of changes that hold even faint promise of improving the public schools' capacity to meet sound education goals," Elam wrote. "But people are not ready to embrace changes that might threaten the principles on which public education is grounded. Thus, they are wary of wholesale privatization or vouchers that have the potential for weakening public schools and creating a two-tiered, elitist system. In short, the public would extract the best from both the liberal and the conservative traditions in American thought."

- ***Americans still trust teachers, principals and school board members to make decisions about how to manage the schools — but the public's trust is wavering.***

When it comes to making decisions about running the public schools, Americans continue to have confidence in the ability of those who traditionally have been entrusted with that responsibility — teachers, principals, administrators and school boards.

In the 1998 PDK/Gallup poll, for example, 80% of respondents rated teachers as "very committed" or "quite committed" to improving local public schools, followed by school board members (73%), superintendents (70%), governors (65%) and legislators (55%).

Even stronger trust in educators was suggested by Public's Agenda's *First Things First* survey, which showed 58% of Americans distrust elected officials in Washington to make decisions about how schools should be run, and 41% are distrustful of their state's governor. Fewer than 15%, however, express serious doubts about teachers and principals. (In fact, 64% give local public school teachers a rating of four or five on a five-point trustworthiness scale, and 54% give principals and school board members a similar vote of confidence.)

"Americans believe that, compared to other decisionmakers such as elected officials, businesspeople and religious leaders, educators can be trusted with decisions about running the schools," the Public Agenda report concluded.

But, the report added the endorsement "is not overwhelming. Substantial numbers of people are not completely confident about [educators'] performance or judgment." Responses to some specific questions about teachers and principals reveal "a fault line in the public's views about them that warrants attention," the report said. For example:

- Fifty-four percent of Americans question teachers' judgment in matters of discipline. More than four in 10 (41%) say too many teachers are more concerned with being popular than with earning respect and enforcing discipline.

- More than a third (37%) say too many teachers are more concerned with making students feel good than with what they learn. One in three respondents say teachers and principals are doing a worse job now than when they were in school.

"The level of dissatisfaction with educators is not enormous, and it is important not to overstate the findings," the Public Agenda report said. "However, large numbers of Americans wonder whether too many teachers are too lax, too easygoing and too quick to let the youngsters run the show."

The report said Americans "still respect the teaching profession and value its significance. Most people still think good teachers are the single most important ingredient in sound education and good schools, and many express empathy for the difficult challenges they face in today's classrooms. But there are some doubts — just beginning to surface — about whether enough teachers are really up to the job that's required of them these days."

There is also evidence that the desire for parents to play a greater role in much school decisionmaking has increased significantly in recent years. In the 1998 PDK/Gallup poll, 57% of respondents favored giving parents a greater say in allocating school funds, compared with 59% of respondents in 1990; 55% supported giving parents a greater say in the selection and hiring of principals, compared with 46% of respondents in 1990; and 48% favored giving parents a greater say in selecting and hiring teachers, compared with 41% in 1990.

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This report is based on a national telephone survey with 1,198 adults. Of this total, 869 interviews were conducted with a representative, randomly drawn sample of adults. The remainder comprise "oversamples" of white, African-American and traditional Christian parents with children in public school. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points for the randomly selected portion of the survey; it is higher for the "oversampled" groups' results. The survey was preceded by a series of four focus groups with public school parents.

Public Agenda (1997). *Getting By: What American Teenagers Really Think About Their Schools*. New York, NY: Public Agenda.

This report is based on a telephone survey of 1,000 randomly selected public high school students within the continental United States, plus a series of oversamples of specific groups. The margin of error for the 1,000 students is plus or minus three percentage points; it is higher for the "oversampled" groups' results. In addition, 12 focus groups were conducted in sites across the country.

Public Agenda (1996). *Given the Circumstances: Teachers Talk About Public Education Today*. New York, NY: Public Agenda.

This report primarily draws upon findings from two separate telephone surveys conducted with public school teachers in 1995. The main survey, conducted specifically for this study, reports the attitudes of 1,164 public school teachers interviewed by telephone throughout the continental United States. Of this total, 800 interviews were conducted with a representative, randomly drawn sample of public school teachers, grades 4 through 12. The remainder comprise black and Hispanic teachers' "oversamples." The margin of error is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points for the randomly selected portion of the survey; it is higher for the "oversampled" groups' results.

The other supplemental survey was part of Public Agenda's 1995 study, *Assignment Incomplete*, and gauged the views of 237 randomly selected public school teachers. The margin of error is plus or minus seven percentage points.

This report also refers to findings from a mail survey of community leaders done for the *Assignment Incomplete* study. This survey was mailed to 3,650 economic, political, civic and education leaders in early May 1995 and netted 1,151 returns — an overall response rate of 32%. Of the 1,151 leaders, 734 were

noneducators, and it was this portion of the leadership results that are reported on in *Given the Circumstances*. They include 261 leaders from the economic sector (e.g., directors of chambers of commerce, union presidents); 165 leaders from the political sector (e.g., mayors, state legislators); 207 civic leaders (e.g., police chiefs, heads of foundations); and 101 leaders from other (noneducator) categories.

Finally, it draws on the dozens of focus groups that Public Agenda has conducted with teachers across the country in recent years for a variety of research projects.

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This report is based on telephone interviews of 1,517 scientifically selected adults in all areas of the nation and in all types of communities. The margin of error is plus or minus two to three percentage points for the entire survey population; it is higher for subpopulations.

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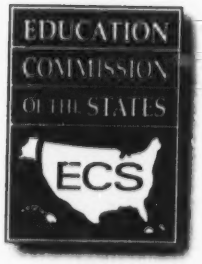
This report is based on telephone interviews of 1,151 scientifically selected adults in all areas of the nation and in all types of communities. The margin of error is plus or minus two to four percentage points for the entire survey population; it is higher for subpopulations.



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